

The La Salle Hotel
120 South Main Street
Bryan, Texas 77801

Written by

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The LaSalle Hotel was designed by Austin architect George Louis Walling and completed in April of 1928. R.W. Howell, member of one of the most prominent families of Bryan, was president of Howell & Co. wholesale grocers and owner of the LaSalle Hotel. Howell envisioned a grand hotel seven stories high with one hundred rooms that “would have all the modern convenience and devices of the hotels to be found in Chicago and New York City.”¹ The cost of the construction of the LaSalle was approximately \$250,000. Dupree Fountain of Houston was the hotel’s first general manager. Although the origin of the hotel’s name remains a mystery, local tradition says that the LaSalle was named after the French explorer Robert de la Salle, who sailed down the Mississippi River to the Gulf of Mexico and claimed the region for France.

The building encompasses Lot 1 of Block 256 of the original townsite, bordered by West 27th Street to the south, Bryan Avenue to the west, South Main Street to the east, and an adjoining building on the north wall. It is a seven-story (with basement) masonry and stone “Neo-Classical Revival” structure, rectangular in shape, with a flat roof and simple details. Its basic plan is 50’ x 100’ for the basement through the second floor. The plan steps back from the common property line 5’ (45’ x 100’) for the remaining five floors. The building envelope is buff brick with structural clay tile backup on the south, east and west facades. The first floor exterior is ashlar veneer which has been painted a neutral beige to blend with the brick. The repetitive window arrangement gives the building its regular, ordered appearance. Windows on the south, east and west facades (floors 2-7) are eight over eight double-hung wooden frame and sash. North windows are

¹ Bryan Daily Eagle, August 31, 1927, “LaSalle Hotel Will Be Seven Stories With a Hundred Rooms.”

two over two double-hung galvanized sashes and are smaller than those on the other facades. Large, wooden frame plate glass storefront windows with transoms adorn the first level on the south, east and west facades. The parapet cap is cast stone and brick with post and rail detailing per the period of construction. Parapet balusters are fused with the brick behind it.

The first floor had two rental spaces facing Main Street, with the entrance to the dining and coffee shop from Main Street in between. The lobby was entered from West 27th Street and was equipped with fine walnut furnishings, terrazzo floors, marble baseboards and two elevators. To the rear of the lobby were the tailor shop, kitchen and café, known as the “LaSalle Black Cat Café.” Also on the first level was a barber shop which faced West 27th Street. The second floor consisted of the convention hall and ballroom with several small dining rooms, manager’s office, and beauty shop. The five top floors contained approximately 100 guest rooms, “each equipped with Simmons beds, dresser, writing table, two chairs, closets, ceiling fan, tub or shower bath and floors carpeted.” Each room had “ventilated” doors with top panels that could be opened and closed, similar to those found in the new hotels in New York.²

The grand opening of the LaSalle Hotel was held on April 26, 1928. The opening, “which was characterized by a splendid menu, brief between courses, speeches, a big time vaudeville program from Houston, and dancing was enjoyed by a large audience, marking one of the most distinctive and elaborate occasions in Bryan’s history.”³

The building represents a style of building technology which was in transition from wood structures to concrete frame and fireproof construction typical in Texas in the 1920’s. It was typical of this type of building to advertise “fire proof” rooms. This building is significant as an example of this construction technology, as many of these types of buildings are reaching their effective life’s end. At the time of its completion, the LaSalle was the tallest building in Bryan and remains the second tallest building in downtown (the Varisco Building c. 1936 is the tallest). The LaSalle continues to serve as an important landmark to the Bryan/College Station area, both because of its height and its former status as one of the finest hotels in America.

² Ibid.

³ The Bryan Daily Eagle, April 28, 1928, “Opening of LaSalle is Big Success.”

The city of Bryan is located on Leagues nine and ten granted to Stephen F. Austin by the Republic of Texas. On May 24, 1855, “in partition of the estate of Stephen F. Austin, part of League No. 10 was set apart to William Joel Bryan, father of the late Guy M. Bryan of Houston and who for many years was vice president of the First National Bank of this city, and grandfather of our fellow-townsmen, Travis B. Bryan, present cashier of the First National Bank.”⁴ On April 9, 1860, William Joel Bryan sold the townsite of 640 acres to A. Groesbeck and W.R. Baker, agents of the Houston and Texas Central Railroad for \$3,200. Upon this plot the town of Bryan was located. The original county seat of Brazos County was Boonville, located approximately two miles east of the present city of Bryan. Due to communication and transportation difficulties, the county seat was moved to Bryan in 1866. William Joel Bryan, after whom the city of Bryan was named, was married to the niece of Stephen F. Austin and came to Texas with Austin’s second colony, landing at the mouth of the Brazos River in 1831.⁵

Bryan was the terminus of the railroad from 1867 to 1869, during which it was a lively business town. Merchandise of all types was shipped by rail to Bryan and then hauled by ox wagons to Waco, Dallas, Corsicana, Denison, and intermediate points. The majority of the people who came to live in Bryan were of Anglo-Saxon descent, generally from the southern states, searching for new fortunes after the Civil War. Other immigrants came from Italy, Poland, Austria, Germany, and Czechoslovakia.

Much of Bryan’s earlier wealth can be attributed to its role as the “center of a rich agricultural region. The Houston and Texas Central and later the International and Great Northern Railroads gave the town access to markets. The lack of competition from surrounding towns accelerated its growth and Bryan was blessed with progressive citizens who worked continually for its advancement.”⁶ Furthermore, the Texas Agricultural and Mechanical College (now Texas A&M University) was located just five miles south and was a powerful influence economically, socially, politically and commercially.

It would not be until 1928, however, that a spacious luxury hotel would be built to accommodate visitors to Bryan and to the College, including families, politicians, society figures, businessmen and military figures. The first record of

⁴ The Bryan Daily Eagle, April 26, 1928, pp. 5-6.

⁵ Lois Alyne Wilcox, The Early History of Bryan, Texas. (Master’s Thesis for a Master of Arts, University of Texas), August 1952, pp. 1-22.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 52

the present LaSalle Hotel property, the corner lot, Number 1, Block 256, fronting 40 feet on Main Street, running back 100 feet to Bryan Avenue, dates back to 1866. On January 20, 1866, “the property was deeded by Groesbeck and Baker with adjacent properties to Wade C. Moseley, a prominent pioneer citizen of this section, and father of Misses Carrie and Addie Moseley, Mrs. C.A. Harris and Mrs. M.Q. Lipscomb of Bryan.” Mr. Moseley died possessed of the property. His estate was administered by Jas. H. Batte, father of the late T.R. Batte, J.L. Batte of Bryan and Dr. John Batte of Hockley.⁷

The next transfer of the property was made when Judge John N. Henderson, uncle of F.N. Henderson, [Ed. Note: correct name is F.L. Henderson] Bryan’s city attorney in 1928, purchased it from the estate of Wade C. Moseley. Among those named in the records as owners of the property during the intervening years were the Odd Fellows Association, William McIntosh, and M.W. Shaw.

Volney Cavitt, father of Mrs. Robert Armstrong of Bryan, and one of the staunch citizens of the early days in Brazos County, bought the property in 1874 from M.W. Shaw, for “2,500 gold dollars.” The lot remained vacant until 1875 when P.R. Smith contracted with Volney Cavitt to build a business house. During the construction process, the building being one of the first, if not the first, two-story brick business houses in Bryan, P.R. Smith, the contractor, became heavily indebted to Volney Cavitt. Smith was also indebted to Colonel Harvey Mitchell and his son-in-law, W.H. Dean for brick burned in their brick kiln, to J.D. Wilson and many others. Later, by mutual agreement of all parties concerned, it was agreed that Volney Cavitt should complete the building, which he did.

The first floor of the building was rented as a business house, as it was called, and the second story was the Academy of Music. The Academy was used as a play house, Bryan’s first theatre and opera house. At the end of the long hall a stage was built and equipped with kerosene lamps and footlights and the floor space provided benches for the spectators. On either side of the large hall were three open fireplaces, where blazing log fires gave out needed heating in the winter. “Local talent, and there was much of it in superior excellence in those days, gave ‘shows’ at the Academy of Music, and many ‘home made’ minstrel performances, the like of which has never yet been equaled here, according to ‘old timers’ who remembered them, were among the attractions that often crowded the

⁷ The Bryan Daily Eagle, April 26, 1928, pp. 5-6.

house to capacity.”⁸ The Academy of Music was later converted into a ballroom by removing the benches from the floor.

The two-story business house and Academy of Music building was purchased in 1896 by A.B. Carr, grandfather of Allen P. Carr of Bryan and John Carr of Dallas, from the owner, Volney Cavitt for \$3,000.

On September 24, 1898, A.B. Carr sold the property to W.E. Saunders and J.W. Johnson of Bryan for \$3,300. Saunders first came to Bryan in November of 1872 and worked as a clerk in a grocery store for McQueen & Davis. He worked here for ten years and later bought an interest in the business. He continued in the business with J.W. Johnson under the firm name of Saunders and Johnson. In an interview with the Bryan Daily Eagle in 1926, Saunders recounts “when I first came to Bryan, there were a number of large stores here then. The railroad was here and had just reached Dallas as terminal. There were one or two brick stores, but most of the business establishments were housed in wooden structures. Many a change has taken place in Bryan since those days. Main Street was a mudhole and mostly sand. The wind blew the sand into the stores.”⁹ Saunders and Johnson, one of the leading general merchandise establishments in that section of the state, occupied the lower floor of the building for more than thirty five years.

On October 15, 1926, R.W. Howell purchased the property from W.E. Saunders, and on November 18, 1927, deeded the same to the LaSalle Properties, Incorporated. “R.W. Howell, one of the wizards of finance in Bryan’s business programs, discerned just ahead, progress unprecedented, and felt that invisible power and impetus of the early days still leading onward for better things in Bryan. With the vision plan before him, and with unshaken confidence in Bryan and its future success and prosperity, R.W. Howell began to plan for the building of a splendid, spacious, modern hotel here, to meet the ever increasing demands of the growing city. The plat of ground on South Main Avenue and West 27th Street was the location chosen by Mr. Howell for the erection of the new hotel.”¹⁰

The Howell family was very involved in the economic development and advancement of Bryan. Dr. John W. Howell, father of R.W., W.S., J. Webb and Jennie Howell, was of the firm Clarke, Bryan and Howell, who chartered the First

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ The Bryan Daily Eagle, August 26, 1926, “Life Sketch of W.E. Saunders and Something of the Early History of Bryan,” p. 4

¹⁰ The Bryan Daily Eagle, April 26, 1928, pp. 5-6

National Bank of Bryan in February 1886. In 1919, R.W. and brother, J. Webb Howell bought the Bryan Telephone Company. A few years later, R.W. Howell sold his interest to J. Webb, who in turn sold the Bryan exchange to the Southwestern States Telephone Company in 1925. W.S. Howell was president of the Howell Lumber Company and secretary of the LaSalle Hotel Company. He was described as one of Bryan's most enthusiastic and effective civic workers.¹¹ Williamson S. Howell, Jr., son of W.S. Howell, was named ambassador to Uruguay and received national attention. He died suddenly of an illness, however, in 1947 before assuming his duties as ambassador.

Robert Wistar (R.W.) Howell was born on January 21, 1877. In an interview with one of his employees of more than 30 years, Mrs. Madelyne O. Chambers recounts her experiences with Mr. Howell. Mrs. Chambers worked for Mr. Howell from the early years of the LaSalle, c. 1928 or 1929, until his death in 1960, filling various roles such as cashier of the LaSalle coffee shop and bookkeeper for his businesses. Mr. Howell also owned Howell & Company Wholesale Grocery, located just across from the LaSalle on West 27th Street. She recalls that he was very active in the First Baptist Church of Bryan and paid to have the Church's pipe organ serviced on a regular basis. Mrs. Chambers described R.W. Howell as "...a man of very few words. If he liked you, alright, but if he didn't, stay away."¹² R.W. Howell had an adopted daughter, Jenny June, and a son, Jack. When he died in July of 1960, he left ten percent of his estate each to Mrs. Chambers and two other faithful employees, five percent to the yard boy, twenty percent each to the First Baptist Church and his son, Jack, and twenty five percent to his nephew, Jack, in Waxahachie. He left nothing to Jenny June, a decision he made some time during his illness. He felt that Jenny June and her husband of Baytown had taken advantage of him.

After being in the Howell family for more than thirty years, the LaSalle property passed to several different owners in the next thirty years. In 1959, J.C. Jacques bought the hotel from R.W. Howell and operated it as a nursing home until 1975 when he sold it to his son, John Jacques. The nursing home had been a successful operation of the elder Jacques, but a federal regulation that took effect in 1975 required nursing homes to have wider hallways and doors than the LaSalle's.¹³ John Jacques reopened the LaSalle as a resident hotel, originally intended for the elderly, with small individual apartments. The LaSalle piqued the

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Madelyne O. Chambers to Kathleen Riker and Jennifer Wall, interview, August 11, 1998.

¹³ Bryan Eagle, June 19, 1975, "LaSalle Hotel Approaches Fiftieth Birthday," p. 9B.

interest of many students and travelers, however, so Jacques later opened it to the general public. Due to a decreasing demand for the small apartment units, the LaSalle was forced to close its doors in 1980. It has remained unoccupied since.

In 1984, five Bryan women, Debra Miller, Carol Montgomery, Nell Stauch, Elizabeth Browning Smith and Sharyn Thornton bought the hotel and planned to renovate it for a reopening in 1986. Financial and legal problems halted that effort, however.

In December 1991, developer Reid Monroe bought the LaSalle and planned to convert the building into a restaurant and apartments. On February 4, 1992, Monroe fell off the roof while lowering a steel measuring tape to a construction worker below.¹⁴

On October 27, 1997, the LaSalle Hotel Ltd., a Texas Limited Partnership, bought the property from Ronnie Monroe Singer, widow of the deceased Reid Monroe. The LaSalle will be reopened in the spring of 1999 as a luxury hotel catering to a business clientele. The people of Bryan, along with the LaSalle Hotel Ltd., believe that the rehabilitation of the LaSalle Hotel will be the catalyst needed for a revitalization of downtown Bryan.

¹⁴ Bryan Eagle, March 26, 1996, "Council to Consider LaSalle Hotel Renovations," p.1A.

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Sources

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Brazos Genealogical Association Cemetery Listing 1982-1988

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Chambers, Madelyne O., to Kathleen Riker and Jennifer Wall, interview in Waco, Texas on August 11, 1998 on the history of the LaSalle Hotel and the Howell family. (Recorded data is on cassette tape and has been transcribed. Data is on file with Michael Gaertner & Associates, Galveston, Texas, and is not yet available to the public.)

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